

**Włodzimierz Sobkowiak.** *Phonetics of EFL Dictionary Definitions*. 2006, 249 pp. ISBN 83-7177-450-8. Anglistyka. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie. Price: 38 zł.

I dream of dictionaries which would redress the anti-phonetic bias of current lexicography.

— Sobkowiak 2006: 11

[A] phonetically uncontrolled defining vocabulary could breed a cancerous monster of a text.

— Sobkowiak 2006: 68

Just as book reviews are written for a variety of reasons, the reviews themselves serve various purposes. Chief among the latter is probably one's wish to know whether or not one should actually *read* the book under review. Let me therefore state upfront that, yes, this work should be on every (meta)lexicographer's bookshelf, where it should only be allowed to gather dust once it has been carefully studied and its contents seriously pondered. When Sobkowiak himself claimed, on p. 14 of the work under review, that "every lexicographer should read this book", I was sceptical, but after having read through the entire text twice, I have to conclude that he is indeed correct.

The reason for this is not so much the fact that this work contains valuable phonetic data (it does, yet that is a given), but rather the fact that core lexicographic principles and methods are presented, summarised and reanalysed in the process. Sobkowiak himself is a man of wide reading, and it shows. Very few aspects needed for his exposition escaped him. What he does need, however, is a PR-officer. As it stands, very few (meta)lexicographers will take to a monograph with the exotic title "*Phonetics of EFL Dictionary Definitions*". Had that title just been "EFL Dictionary Definitions", or even "Dictionary Definitions for Learners of English — How They Can Be Improved", the book would have been an instant bestseller. By doing so one is not tricking the reader, rather, one makes sure that that reader is not put off before even picking up the book. (Admittedly, the title of the current book is already better than that of Sobkowiak's 1999 monograph: "Pronunciation in EFL Machine-Readable Dictionaries", where something (again equally relevant) like "Electronic Dictionaries: The State of the Art & The Shape of Things to Come" would again have meant instant success.)

Of course, with close to three decades of research into inter alia English phonetics and phonology as well as English lexicography — making him one of the world's sole phonolexicographers — I understand why it is hard for Sobkowiak to give in to market pressures. But when one has something to say (as is the case for Sobkowiak), one must also attempt to get the message across.

Sobkowiak's message in this book is a fascinating one as, despite the current hype and excitement as a result of ever better concepts and tools put forward for dictionary making (with corpus-driven compilation a *sine qua non*), important concepts and tools *remain fully untapped*. In this book that concept is the notion that definitions (in learners' dictionaries) need to be controlled pho-

netically, so that these definitions can be processed more easily by the dictionary users. The suggested tool is the so-called Phonetic Difficulty Index (henceforth PDI). With lots of electronic (corpus and dictionary) data at one's disposal, PDIs can be studied on the word level (for example with regard to Defining Vocabularies (DVs)), or on the level of entire definitions (as well as on any other microstructural level).

The book is divided into three parts: a front section consisting of an Abstract and an Introduction, a middle section containing eight Chapters in which the main argument is logically developed, and a back section including a Bibliography, Table and Figure indexes, and seven Appendices. Opening a monograph with a page-long abstract is somewhat strange, especially when the first paragraph already mentions the end conclusion: "[D]efinition text can, and should, be to some extent phonetically controlled to avoid lexical maxima of high phonetic difficulty, ensure easy (subvocal) reading, hence — foster understanding and incidental vocabulary learning by learners" (p. 7). The Introduction goes on to lament the fact that "nothing much has changed in lexicographic phonetics since the advent of computers" and this, on top, "in the context of almost complete oblivion of matters phonetic in lexicography" (p. 10). The target of this book is defined as "mainly (meta)lexicographers and EFL teachers (and learners)" (p. 13).

Chapter 1 is mostly a presentation of relevant existing studies in EFL vocabulary learning on the one hand, and an enumeration of why phonetic difficulty should be addressed by dictionary makers at all on the other. In Chapter 2 the creation of a 'reference lexicon' (i.e. the lexicon, derived from OALD3, against which all other data is compared throughout the book) is described. In Chapter 3 the PDI itself is introduced, which turns out to be a tool that captures pronouncing difficulties by Polish learners of English (who end up speaking 'Polglish'). A total of 57 such difficulties are listed, and each is assigned a value of 1. The validation of the PDI tool as summarised in Figure 2 (p. 51) is especially appealing.

Chapter 4 proceeds with a detailed discussion of the phonetic aspects of the DVs of the so-called Big Five monolingual EFL dictionaries of English, viz. OALD, LDOCE, COBUILD, CIDE and MEDAL. Overall, DVs are shown to be "phonetically easier than general vocabulary" (p. 66). In Chapter 5, the (general) phonetic aspects of EFL dictionary definitions are then discussed. Unfortunately, quite some material that had already been presented in the Introduction is repeated here, which indicates that the whole of the Introduction had better be integrated into the middle section of the work.

Armed with all the knowledge and data from the previous Chapters, Chapter 6 then offers a detailed case study of the phonetics of MEDAL definitions. A wide variety of permutations of data drawn from the reference lexicon, the BNC, other Big Five dictionaries and MEDAL is effected, with often highly interesting (though predictable) results. In Chapter 7 several dozen pedagogical applications of phonetically treated definitions are then offered, while Chapter 8 concludes the study with a recap of the main outcomes.

One of these main outcomes of the study may be summarised with the following question: "If *thorough* is among the phonetically hardest lexical items for Polish EFL learners (PDI=6), for example, why not use a substitute (*complete* has PDI=1) in definitions [...]?" (p. 151). Likewise, on p. 90 it is suggested to use, wherever possible, *if* instead of *whether* in definitions, or on p. 102, to use *substance which* rather than *substance that*, "a phrase which would make the user's life easier". Given there are differences between *which* and *that*, and that, in general, there are no real synonyms, I doubt many definition writers would be all too happy with such changes though.

As can be seen, I have refrained from showing any phonetics, formulas or otherwise incomprehensible codes in this review. This was on purpose, as I wanted to make sure that Sobkowiak's core message would be conveyed. In this respect, Sobkowiak himself is not doing the reader a great favour in his book, however. One simply has to know quite a bit about lexicography already, as well as of phonetics and even statistics, in order to smoothly transit from one section to the next in his book. Especially taxing is the (at times haphazard) use of abbreviations for all dictionaries. They are not always standard, change throughout the text, and have not been brought together anywhere either. Those who do not know the dictionaries themselves and/or their abbreviations will have to read through the entire Bibliography in order to find their meaning. Similarly, the first time the reader encounters a phonetic script in the book (on p. 21), it is not the usual IPA, but an ASCII rendition. From there onwards, the ASCII renditions only become more and more complex. A table mapping the ASCII versions with the more usual IPA symbols would have been welcome in the back section. Even more obscure are the various codes used to represent parts of speech and then later PDI codes. Again, at least a single table in the back section should have brought the codes and their meanings together. Nor would it harm to expand, in say a glossary in the back section, corpus and statistical abbreviations such as LOB, BNC, KWIC or MI.

On the whole, these are but a few aspects of the general carelessness that permeates the entire text. Not surprisingly, the monograph brings together various results that have been published over the years, in different formats, in a range of journals, each with its own style. Best would probably have been to rewrite all the material, as the frequent self-quotes and self-references break the flow. In addition, while most of the text uses 'I/my', there are accidental remnants of 'the present author' (cf. e.g. p. 70). Some citations have also been repeated more than once (cf. e.g. p. 79 = p. 103). The text could also have done with an extra proofread, as especially the definite article is (and occasionally the indefinite articles are) missing. Several dozen spelling errors, typos and omissions may also be found, as the following sample shows:

- p. 59: tile → title
- p. 66: CV → DV (twice, plus various other errors on this page)
- p. 82: page 47 → page 65

- 
- p. 88: A number of interesting observation → A number of interesting observations
  - p. 91: URL, extra white space should be deleted
  - p. 94: worth while → worthwhile
  - p. 123: was presented above in , it was used in above, the list in below
  - p. 129: was used once again collect → was used once again to collect
  - p. 153: The full potential ... can only be released ... → The full potential ... can only be realised ...

Furthermore, the meaning of "[\*]" in the Bibliography is only explained on p. 78; it could and should at least also have been mentioned at the start of the Bibliography itself. Given the Appendices are linked to very specific pages in the middle section, mentioning the respective pages could similarly have eased readability, thus:

- Appendix 1: p. 34
- Appendix 2: p. 49
- Appendix 3: p. 60
- Appendix 4: p. 61
- Appendix 5: p. 99 (p. 96)
- Appendix 6: p. 131
- Appendix 7: p. 135 (p. 132, 140, 143)

One of the dangers of recycling one's own earlier texts is that one may also forget to explain some core terms. This is the case with the frequently used 'phonolapsological' — which is not clarified anywhere, even though it is used throughout the monograph. Googling for more information does not help, as the nine hits all refer to titles of works by Sobkowiak himself, cf. below: "(9, all WS)", where also other Sobkowiesque words used in the book are listed:

- non-bi-uniqueness / non-biuniqueness (2)
- phoncordance (2, both WS)
- phono-didactic (0)
- phonolapsological (9, all WS)
- PhonoLapsological Affinity Classes (0)
- PhonoLapsological Identity Class (1, WS)
- "phonolexical metric" (0)

In a new edition of the book, all of the above infelicities could easily be attended to. Three more issues also seem worthwhile to address. Firstly, the discussion of type/token ratios on p. 95 may be dropped, as they are mostly meaningless as long as one does not work with *standardised* type/token ratios. Secondly, I would have appreciated a more critical stance on the claimed DV sizes, versus the real number of words used, as revealed through this study (cf. e.g. p. 62). Thirdly and lastly, how portable are the results from this study to other languages, and thus away from Polish? As it stands, this is now an open question (on p. 183), which seems unsatisfactory. Once one has an answer to this, the results will truly have the potential of being of 'universal' use.

**Abbreviations used** (numbers that follow dictionary abbreviations are edition numbers)

ASCII	American Standard Code for Information Interchange
BNC	British National Corpus
CIDE	Cambridge International Dictionary of English
COBUILD	Collins Birmingham University International Language Database
DV	Defining Vocabulary
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
KWIC	Keyword in Context
LDOCE	Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English
LOB	London/Oslo/Bergen Corpus
MEDAL	Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners
MI	Mutual Information
OALD	Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary
PDI	Phonetic Difficulty Index

## Reference

Włodzimierz Sobkowiak. 1999. *Pronunciation in EFL Machine-Readable Dictionaries*. Poznań: Motivex.

Gilles-Maurice de Schryver  
*Department of African Languages and Cultures*  
*Ghent University*  
*Ghent, Belgium*  
*Xhosa Department*  
*University of the Western Cape*  
*Bellville, Republic of South Africa*  
*TshwaneDJe HLT*  
*Pretoria, Republic of South Africa*  
([gillesmaurice.deschryver@UGent.be](mailto:gillesmaurice.deschryver@UGent.be))